

Vincenzo Ruggiero and Mick Ryan, *Punishment in Europe*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013; ISBN 978-1-137-02820-4, £55.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Luisa Ravagnani, University of Brescia, Italy

This book, edited by Ruggiero and Ryan, provides an interesting perspective on the European penitentiary systems and criminal policies underlying the use of criminal sanctions in 12 countries. Comparing different criminal justice systems in criminology is undoubtedly a difficult task to accomplish since it must be assumed that at the base of each, there are substantial differences regarding the content and meanings of common words such as “punishment” and “resocialization”. Indeed, even whilst there may now be now broad agreement on what constitutes criminal conduct, the same cannot be said for the content of penalties. Although reference to the rehabilitative aim of the sentences is found in many supranational rules, this is not sufficient to ensure that States develop homogeneous models of alternative sanctions. In the book, we find out about substantial contradictions between the objectives pursued by the supranational legislation (reduction in the use of the penalty of imprisonment, respect for the human rights for prisoners, investment in prisoners’ educational and the development of alternatives to prison that can be effective and readily implemented), shared by all the Member States through the implementation of regulatory instruments such as the European Prison rules, the Probation Prison Rules, the European Convention on Human Rights and Framework decisions, and particular social policies, applied at a national level, in their individual contexts.

After considering trends in imprisonment over the last 10 years, the authors point out that there is a general overuse of the penalty of imprisonment as a response to demands for an increased level of safety on the part of civil society and link this with prison overcrowding and the widespread violation of prisoners’ human rights. Careful attention is paid to weaknesses in the argument that attributes rising prison populations to increased levels of crime. Indeed, the statistics related to the number of inmates and the incarceration rates can offer a good overview of the use of the criminal response within each State, but it is also true that this information on its own is misleading, if unrelated to socio-economic conditions within the countries themselves. This highlights the necessity of an interdisciplinary study aimed to place imprisonment within a more complex reality, which takes into account the historical and political developments that each country has experienced, or is experiencing.

Aware of all these difficulties, the authors seek to provide a comprehensive overview of the possible sanction models, including those (of which the academic community has little information) that emerged after the fall of the Berlin wall and the breakup of the former USSR. Detailed information on the historical development and the socio-political context in which the sanctioning systems act in countries such as Russia, Bulgaria, Poland and Greece make this book particularly relevant in the comparison of penitentiary systems, traditionally rich of information about English-speaking countries and their interesting probation traditions. Regarding the latter, it should be mentioned that Ruggiero and Ryan’s book does not repeat known information in predictable ways. Rather, by analysing the socio-political conditions that underpin criminal policy choices, it offers new insights and reveals that arguments for increased incarceration are often contradictory.

What comes across from reading each chapter is the idea that the pre-enlightenment culture of punishment has found fertile ground nowadays as an emotional response to collective fears arising from Islamic terrorism, increased migration flows and the effects of economic crisis. This trend contributes to the risk that violations of rights towards inmates can be seen as inevitable in the pursuit of public safety, achieved through the excessive use of incarceration, the tightening of convictions in terms of length of the sentence and through a renunciation of the re-educative dimension of criminal justice responses. Therefore, even countries with a strong traditional use of alternative measures, suffer from a growth in prison population, whilst those which have recently switched to alternative penalties are prevented from achieving their full potential in terms of long-term re-offending reduction rates, which might, in turn, give an immediate, evidence-based response to external communities' security concerns.

The book often deals with the high numbers of foreign nationals in the European prisons who, together with the poorer social classes (often coinciding), constitute discriminated against and penalized populations on which the effects of the culture of punishment fall. The numerical strength of this group of prisoners should suggest a specific consideration of the phenomenon, directing the subsequent criminal policy choices towards a greater social effectiveness, rather than an apparent neutralization of the problem through segregation.

Ruggero and Ryan's book is full of updated references of particular interest for students, prison and probation staff, policy makers and any researchers who wish to understand not only the structural aspects of the prison system in Europe, but also the criminological, sociological and political aspects, supported by a careful critical review.